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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 003677

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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, LONDON FOR TSAU, PARIS FOR ZEYA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/13/2025

TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR KU PDEM

SUBJECT: REVIVED AL-SABAH DEBATE OVER SUCCESSION;

LEADERSHIP CHANGE RUMORED TO BE POSSIBLE BY END OF YEAR

REF: A. KUWAIT 3669

1B. KUWAIT 3580

1C. 04 KUWAIT 4540

1D. 04 KUWAIT 3580

1E. 04 KUWAIT 3391

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (S/NF) Summary: Sources indicate a major change in leadership may take place in Kuwait, possibly before the end of August. Although Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is considered the primary candidate for Amir, his succession is not a foregone conclusion. According to several sources, Shaykh Salem Al-Ali Al-Salem Al-Sabah is a serious contender. "Everyone smells blood and wants a piece of the power," one Al-Sabah family member and self-described "close confidant" of the PM told PolOff. The renewed debate on succession in Kuwait was sparked by the return of Amir Shaykh Jaber Al-Sabah on August 9 from extended medical treatment in the United States and the recent death of Saudi King Fahd. If either the Amir or Crown Prince Shaykh Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah dies without an appointed successor, the National Assembly would be drawn into the succession process, a possibility sources indicate the Al-Sabah family would like to avoid. We believe a leadership change would have little immediate impact on U.S. interests in Kuwait. End summary.

An Al-Sabah Predicts Change Is Around the Corner

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12. (S/NF) On August 13, PolOff met with Shaykh Mohammed Abdullah Mubarak Al-Sabah, who said he was a "close confidant" of Shaykh Sabah and was perceived to be one of three people capable of influencing the PM (ref B for additional bio information). Asked about succession in Kuwait, Shaykh Mohammed confirmed that there was an internal struggle within the Al-Sabah family over the Amirship and that a decision on succession would most likely be made before the end of the year, or possibly sooner. "Everyone smells blood and wants a piece of the power," he said. Although he said he could not imagine anyone but the PM becoming Amir, Shaykh Mohammed acknowledged that "only Shaykh Sabah knows" who would succeed the Amir.

13. (S/NF) Of the numerous factions within the Al-Sabah family, the Al-Ahmed line of the Jaber branch is currently the most powerful, particularly in numbers, Shaykh Mohammed confided, adding that the Salem branch was "out." Echoing previous statements from Al-Sabah members (ref B), Shaykh Mohammed said that the alternation between the Jaber and Salem branches of the family was "only a historical coincidence." He confirmed that the Al-Sabah family in general, and Shaykh Sabah in particular, was actively discussing succession. (Note: Shaykh Mohammed received a phone call at the end of our meeting telling him that the PM had just met with the Amir. Shaykh Mohammed said they were supposed to talk soon about succession and speculated that this may have been that meeting. End note.)

14. (S/NF) Shaykh Mohammed mentioned rumors that Shaykh Salem Al-Ali Al-Salem Al-Sabah, who was recently given the title "His Highness" and is the third most senior member of the Al-Sabah family after the Amir and the Crown Prince, was a potential candidate. He dismissed this possibility saying Shaykh Salem had publicly stated that he did not desire the Amirship. In a meeting with the Ambassador on August 15, Shaykh Salem confirmed that changes could come in the near future, but he was not specific about who might take on new leadership roles (ref A). (Note: Estimated to be 81 years old, Shaykh Salem might be a short-term solution to the issue of succession, placating the Salem branch of the Al-Sabah family by allowing the traditional alternation with the Jaber branch. If this scenario happens, the key questions will then be who becomes Crown Prince, and will the positions of Crown Prince and Prime Minister, separated in 2003, be re-merged. End note.) Also, Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah would like power at some point, Shaykh Mohammed added, "but we are not sure where this will go."

**15.** (S/NF) Commenting that there are "murmurs" a decision on succession would be made before year's end, Shaykh Mohammed expressed hope that a new Amir would be announced before Ramadan, which begins October 3, so that Kuwaitis could celebrate the new Amir during the Ramadan festivities.

Media Contacts Suggest Imminent Succession Meeting

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**16.** (C) In recent meetings, various media contacts independently suggested that leadership changes in Kuwait were imminent. On August 2, Mohammed Al-Jassem, former editor-in-chief of Al-Watan newspaper and the host of the Al-Hurra program Al-Majlis, speculated that both the Amir and the Crown Prince would step aside in late August. Al-Jassem predicted that Shaykh Salem would become the new Amir, not the PM. Al-Jassem cited anecdotal evidence to support his claim: a friend recently told him that Shaykh Salem told the friend of changes he was planning on making when he became Amir. Al-Jassem also said he heard that Shaykh Sabah had begun informing Shaykh Salem of his actions, suggesting a possible shift in power. He cited other anecdotal evidence that two powerful shaykhs, whom he did not name, were developing closer ties with Shaykh Salem in the hopes of gaining influence with the future Amir.

**17.** (S) Adnan Qaqoon, the chief of local news for the pro-government Arabic daily Al-Qabas, told PDOFF in July that ruling family members had been ordered to return to Kuwait by late August for an important Al-Sabah family meeting, perhaps to oversee the voluntary stepping-down of the Amir and/or the Crown Prince, who are widely acknowledged as medically unfit for their positions. Although such a move would be unprecedented, Qaqoon said the Al-Sabah family would prefer to avoid a messy, public confrontation over succession if either leader passed away without a capable successor in place. Qaqoon predicted that Shaykh Sabah would become Amir, but said he was unsure what other changes might occur.

**18.** (C) Longtime columnist for Al-Rai Al-Aam newspaper and author of a book on succession in Kuwait, Ahmed Al-Deyain told Emboffs that a leadership change in Kuwait was possible, but questioned whether a change would actually take place before the death of either the Amir or the Crown Prince. Although the death of King Fahd was a wake-up call to some Al-Sabah, Al-Deyain said, given a choice between action and inaction, the Al-Sabah usually choose inaction. Jassem Boodai, owner and editor-in-chief of Al-Rai Al-Aam and a close confidant of the PM, also intimated that there would be a major Al-Sabah family meeting in August to discuss succession. He did not offer any additional details. (Note: We have noticed that most of the senior family members have not gone abroad for vacation as of mid-August. End note.)

Amir and Crown Prince "in God's Waiting Room"

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**19.** (C) The Amir's frail appearance on his return to Kuwait August 9 from medical treatment in the United States and unusually intense media coverage of the event renewed speculation over succession in Kuwait. The Amir looked very weak and was whisked in a wheelchair to a waiting car soon after his plane landed (ref A). State broadcast media carried continuous coverage of the Amir's life and rule accompanied by patriotic songs the day of his return. On August 10, all local newspapers published the same photo of the Amir's return, portraying the frail leader with gray hair. Although most pictures of the Amir continue to depict him in good health and with black hair, when he returned to Kuwait in 2004, his beard and hair were gray and undyed. According to Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Al-Sabah, the Amir is suffering from Parkinson's disease.

**10.** (C) The Crown Prince also has serious health problems. In 2001, he suffered serious brain damage from a stroke and is now confined to a wheelchair. He does not speak and does not appear to comprehend others' speech. Nonetheless, the charade that he still exerts influence continues. There are almost weekly news items of cables from the Crown Prince to world leaders and pictures of him receiving senior Al-Sabah family government officials. More recent newspaper photos showed him being propped forward by an aid/bodyguard to kiss the Amir after the Amir's return to Kuwait.

Succession Process A Family Matter

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**11.** (C) The unforeseen death of either the Amir or the Crown Prince without a capable, appointed successor would initiate a complex constitutional process involving the National Assembly in the succession. Shaykh Mohammed emphasized that the family should do something before such an event occurs. With Kuwait's free media, the process would be open to extensive public scrutiny, an uncomfortable proposition for the Al-Sabah family, Shaykh Mohammed concluded.

**¶12. (U)** Article 4 of Kuwait's 1962 Constitution clearly details the succession process. Only descendants of Mubarak Al-Sabah, the founder of modern Kuwait, are permitted to become Amir. Although there are four branches of the Mubarak family, tradition dictates that only the descendants of the two main branches, Jaber and Salem, are considered candidates for Amir. With one exception in 1965, succession has alternated between these two branches of the family. Per Article 4, a Crown Prince must be appointed by the Amir within a year of accession and approved by a majority of the National Assembly. If the Amir fails to designate a Crown Prince or if the National Assembly vetoes his first choice, he must nominate three descendants of Mubarak Al-Sabah, one of whom is chosen by a majority of the National Assembly. If the Amir dies before nominating a Crown Prince, the matter is referred to the Cabinet, which votes on a new Amir in a special session. While this is the formal procedure, the real succession decisions are made by the Al-Sabah during private family meetings.

**¶13. (C)** Al-Sabah family members are clearly aware of the potential problems of succession in Kuwait if either the Amir or the Crown Prince died without appointing a capable successor. The issue of succession, however, is complicated by internal family politics, as different factions compete to place their candidate(s) in positions of power. Sources have argued that the Crown Prince, incapable of assuming the throne, should step aside of his own accord, (although it is not clear to us that he is capable of independent action due to his illness). If he refuses, the Amir could declare him physically unfit for his position. The matter would then be referred to the National Assembly, which would vote to remove the Crown Prince after an independent medical examination. A new heir would be chosen through the process outlined above. Obviously, the Al-Sabah family would prefer to avoid such a public spectacle. The Amir may avoid addressing the question of succession and die in office; however, if, as our sources indicate, the Al-Sabah family forces a decision be made on succession, the Amir is likely to convince the Crown Prince to step aside himself, clearing the way for the appointment of a new heir.

#### Implications for U.S. Policy

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**¶14. (S/NF)** A change of leadership in Kuwait would have little immediate impact on U.S. interests in the country, particularly if Shaykh Sabah, considered the de-facto ruler, becomes Amir. Shaykh Sabah would likely continue to pursue pragmatic policies, particularly with regard to Iraq, regional security, and oil exports. Kuwaitis often attribute slow decision-making in Kuwait to intra-family jockeying for future position and influence. If a change at the top eliminates some of the stagnation, as many believe, this could serve U.S. interests in more rapid economic liberalization and accelerated political reform.

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